

(U) Ask Zelda!: The Young and the Restless

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The below article is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Zelda,

(U) I'm new to the agency and I'm also a young employee (in my late 20s). I have noticed that the older managers/supervisors think that we don't have the skills/knowledge/potential to run this agency in the near future. I heard them saying that. They tend to stereotype/discriminate without knowing our intelligence and fresh knowledge.

What can we do to make them think differently?

Thanks, Younger Skills

Dear Younger Skills,

If a U.S. citizen can be President of our country at age 35,* I can't see any official reason why someone couldn't also run the Agency at that age--as long as you've been in the intelligence business (in particular at NSA) for several years to gain a wide range of experience.

Now, I'm going to assume that by "run this agency" you are referring to the broader definition of being in a senior leadership position, and not the restricted interpretation of being the DIRNSA. If the latter, you would have to be a U.S. military General (O-9), and achieving that rank is not realistic by age 35 (unless you have had a career like some Hollywood action heroes).

Why do they think this way?

I believe that the older managers are referring to attributes beyond intelligence and state-of-the-art knowledge. In fact, I have heard many comment on how bright our new, younger employees are. There is no doubt in my mind that they believe our technical future is in good hands.

When they say you're not ready to lead the Agency, my guess is that what they're referring to falls more into the area of judgment and maturity or wisdom--EQ versus IQ.** Many of these comments probably have their root in generational variation and stem from differences in style.

What can you do to change their minds?

Your challenge will be to show the older managers and supervisors that you have the qualifications they see as necessary, and thereby gain their respect. Much of what I'm about to say is based on generalizations, and not every younger employee behaves this way; but like it or not, perception is reality.

- **Broaden your knowledge.** Some older employees may have concerns that the younger NSAers do not have not the breadth of experience needed to run the Agency. Show them otherwise by gaining a broad-based foundation for your career here. Include at least one tour outside NSA.
- **Listen more than you speak.** At a young age, you don't know what you don't know. You have seen a small slice of the world (or NSA or the IC) and have formed generalized opinions... and you are not shy about sharing them. These opinions may sound very naïve and uninformed to others who have been around the block several times and have a much wider perspective.
- **Dress the part.** Many younger employees, especially the technical ones, tend to dress less formally. This may send an unconscious message to the older generation that they are less serious about the job. Consider wearing attire that oozes professionalism to help them take you more seriously. ***
- **Watch what you share on social media.** Generation Y employees typically have a different communication style than Boomers--they let it all hang out on social media in what may be interpreted as not-very-discreet displays of their own ignorance. At a time when media leaks are causing our leadership a lot of extra work to clean up, a lack of discretion can be seen as a very dangerous thing. Before you hit "Send," think: will this email/post come back to haunt me when I'm up for a senior-level position in a few years? If in doubt, don't share it in print.
- **Learn the business side of NSA** in addition to the mission side--or vice versa.
- **Become politically savvy.** The Agency is a political place. So is the DoD and IC. It takes a while to understand the politics and even longer to figure out how to play the game. The most successful senior leaders do this well.
- **Ask questions** of your elders; show that you're willing to learn. Don't ignore our organizational history. Your great idea for revolutionizing SIGINT may have been tried in the past--learn why it didn't work at that time so you can improve upon it before you present it again.
- **Shadow some senior leaders.** Let your supervisor know you are interested in being a future leader and would appreciate any mentoring or advice on how to best position yourself for that. Many organizations (like **SID**) have succession-planning efforts. The goal of these efforts is specifically to groom the younger generation to lead the Agency.
- **Be patient.** In "the olden days," employees understood they had to pay their dues. Now that it's less common for a worker to stay with the same employer for decades than it was back then, many younger employees seem impatient to older employees: expecting to be promoted immediately or put in charge after only a short time here. While you are doing all the right things above, you might have to accept the fact that you'll need to wait a while.

Older managers, in turn, need to appreciate their younger employees' contributions and see beyond differences in style. They should listen to your ideas and take the time discuss them or explain why, something wouldn't work rather than dismiss it out of hand. Like it or not, the younger employees are our future leaders. Now is the time to start grooming the twenty-somethings.

Edits

Notes:

* Minimum age set by the Constitution. The youngest elected president we have had is JFK, who was 43. Conversely, Ronald Reagan was nearly 70 when he first became President. Most of our Presidents initially took office in their 50s. Clearly, Americans tend to prefer maturity for positions of national importance.

** Emotional Intelligence or Emotional Quotient (EQ) is the ability to accurately perceive your own and others' emotions, understand the signals that emotions send about relationships, and manage your own and others' emotions. Research has shown that EQ, and not IQ (intelligence quotient), determines a person's ability to be effective in life and is a stronger predictor of success.

*** I'd like to give a shout-out to Security's special agents who are, on the whole, a particularly natty bunch. Thank you for classing up the workplace. 😊
